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*Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century.* By Winter, Tim. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 304 pp. doi: 10.22679/avs.2022.7.1.010

With much fanfare and applaud, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched in 2013, which aims to enhance China's links with Asia, Europe, and Africa through a network of overland and maritime trade routes historically known as the Silk Roads. In the following years, the world has witnessed China's investment of trillions of dollars in Asia and Africa's infrastructures. While most existing studies have discussed the BRI in geopolitical or geoeconomic terms, in his new book *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century*, Tim Winter delves into the history of the Silk Roads to view the BRI as 'a site of cultural production and cultural politics' (p. xii). In doing so, he strives to reveal how the notion of the Silk Roads is used as 'a strategic attempt to soften and alter the nature of China's engagement' in world economics and politics (p. 17). By reestablishing and reshaping history, as Winter forcefully argues, China is actively adopting the past as a mechanism of heritage policy, emphasising the idea that societies in different parts of the world have been historically connected and culturally entangled. Because Chinese civilisation has historically played a central role in such a network, the Silk Roads thus provide China with a new form of geocultural power.

Instead of trying to delineate a full-scale story of this process, Winter chooses to explain how the BRI, as a political project of historical reimagination, highlights connections, trends, and assemblages. After an introduction to the conceptual framework in Chapter 1, the following six chapters map out the interconnected pathways of how China attempts to engineer the past in present-day international politics. Chapter 2 offers a brief biography of the Silk Road concept, revealing that its history since the nineteenth century has been understood within the politics of nation-building and international conflicts. Chapter 3 identifies the historical concepts of the Silk Roads—harmony, friendship, cooperation, connection—as to how they have been used in the discourse of government to nurture international relationships. Chapter 4 examines a series of infrastructure investments trumpeted as outcomes of the BRI. Analysing items that have been traded along the Silk Roads, including silk textiles, metalware, porcelain, and ceramics, Chapter 5 illustrates how the BRI imbues objects with particular values and structures maritime heritage policy, a strategy embraced not only by China but also by Southeast Asian countries. Outlining recent research on Central Asia and the Indian Ocean, Chapter 6 turns to consider how the renewed interest in the Silk Roads, facilitated by the BRI, provides new ways to write world history and to narrate identities of nations and cities. The final chapter reflects on these developments at a more conceptual level by contrasting processes of smoothing to Anna Tsing's notion of friction.

Throughout the volume, Winter successfully presents how the Silk Roads are established as a geocultural imaginary and thus function as a form of geocultural power. With the announcement of the BRI, China artfully uses history and heritage to obtain a unique platform to exercise its geocultural advantage. In this way, two spatial arcs converge—the

Silk Roads of the past and the BRI of the twenty-first century, both of which are ‘constituted by indeterminate networks of connectivity’ (p. 193). While countries across Central and Southeast Asia have utilised history for the purpose of their nation-building, the notion of the Silk Roads signals a new era of multilateral heritage making. Whereas religion and heritage continue to be a source of conflict and dispute, the Silk Roads, with denoted emphasis on exchange and integration, doubtlessly represent a new mechanism through which more dialogue and cooperation can be advanced. Certainly, because the Silk Roads serve as a historical foundation for the diplomacy of the BRI, the past is being designedly rewritten and the discourses are being purposely reshaped. As Winter persuasively demonstrates through his narrative, histories and cultural artefacts are not necessarily recounted in accordance with historical reality, as in the case of the voyages led by Zheng He (1371–1433). Rather, they are symbolically coded and repackaged in ways that ‘help ensure cities and entire countries are tied into the new networks of trade being established under Belt and Road’ (p. 24). In order to form a grand political narrative, the history of the Silk Road comes to be revived by the bundling up of both material objects from the past but also of current political and economic forces.

One of the most important contributions in this book is its emphasis on the Maritime Silk Road, which has long been neglected by both historians and scholars of political sciences. While the Silk Roads are conventionally understood as the overland networks of trading routes, the BRI brings the cultural history of the sea into focus. Encompassing Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, the BRI, with its contention of the Maritime Silk Road, is creating new ways of seeing Eurasian and world history. Stimulated by the BRI, heritage as a concept is being reimagined to provide new means to ‘appropriate history for their own ends’ (p. 32). For instance, museums, archaeological sites, artefacts of trade, and fragmented histories are put together by different countries to form an integrated story of a shared past. Not surprisingly, this past is overwhelmingly China-centric.

Much of Winter’s discussion is fascinating and convincing, yet on some occasions, one may have a feeling that the author is somehow overstressing the geocultural power. The strategy of making use of the historical resonance of the Silk Roads for contemporary international relations, for instance, is not an invention of China. Some may recall that in July 2011, the US Secretary of the State Hilary Clinton, when delivering a speech in Chennai, announced the launch of the New Silk Road Initiative, noting that ‘historically, the nations of South and Central Asia were connected to each other and the rest of continent by a sprawling trading network called the Silk Road.’<sup>1</sup> As for the reason why this project failed to achieve its goals, Winter argues that it ‘lacked [...] an understanding of how their new Silk Road mapped onto a narrative of history being propelled forward by rapid changes in the region’ (p. 79). However, readers versed in international politics would note the failure of the US version of the Belt and Road is mostly to be attributed to the fact that this project

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in James Millward, *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 118.

was underfunded and under-resourced. Moreover, because this project focuses on a much more limited ‘southern corridor’, it also lacked the Pacific-to-Atlantic scope that would have attracted more international support. While history and culture play a significant role in international relations, their importance should not be exaggerated.

This minor quibble should by no means detract from this volume’s remarkable merit as a compelling study of how objects and discourses about past events and people are being mobilised as part of the wider diplomatic relations and cooperation structures of the Belt and Road. Covering a panoramic scope of issues, *Geocultural Power* is well-suited for both introductory overview and scholarly reading. As China’s economy continues to grow and the BRI is in high gear, it is bound to inspire future studies on this highly interesting topic.

Hang Lin  
*Hangzhou Normal University, China*

*From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus: The Soviet Union and the Making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh.* By Arsène Saparov. New York: Routledge, 2017. 200 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-65802-7. doi: 10.22679/avs.2022.7.1.011

The South Caucasus has come to the fore of international society and grabbed both policymakers’ and academics’ attention, firstly, following the skirmishes in Georgia in 2008 and then during the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh War. Numerous observers have explained the causes of the ongoing conflicts by focusing on the historical and political legacy of the policies and their implementation during czarist Russia and the Soviet era. In contrast, relatively few studies have given priority to the effects of the creation of autonomies in the region and their status. In a similar vein, in *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus*, Saparov presents a valuable analysis of the historical record of the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh, emphasizing the ramifications of the political status of these areas throughout both the Russian Empire and the Soviet era. Drawing on comprehensive archival research, mainly through Russian and partly Armenian sources, the author elaborates on the underlying motives and the process of the establishment of autonomous political entities and institutions in the Caucasus and the effects of these mechanisms on both past and recent conflicts in the region.

The first chapter of the book briefly surveys the expansion of the Russian Empire towards the Caucasus from the beginning of the nineteenth century to 1918. The author asserts that dissimilar to the Ottoman and Iranian empires, Russian rule aimed at the political, social, and identity transformation of the region by imposing its power via transferring and incorporating administrative structures, despite the resistance of local elites (p. 20-21). The next three chapters examine the logic behind Soviet rule as it granted autonomy to Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh following the Russian Civil War. These chapters further